

COMMENDATION AND REPROOF OF
UNITARIANS.

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SERMON,

ADAMS
1829

DELIVERED IN THE SECOND UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

IN BOSTON,

SABBATH EVENING,

NOV. 29, 1829.

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BY HOSEA BALLOU...PASTOR.

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ADAMS 1814

SERMON.

REVELATION II. 4.

“ Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee.”

IN the epistle to the angel of the church of Ephesus, we have an example worthy to be imitated. Those things for which that church was worthy of commendation, were first mentioned, and received their due approbation ; after which, the writer says, “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee.” And then he proceeds faithfully to set forth those faults which deserved to be corrected.

It is our design, this evening, to follow this excellent example, while endeavoring to perform the labors which the congregation has reason to expect. If we find it a duty to inform a beloved friend of some faults which it is his interest to reform, both love and prudence will dictate this commendable method. We must first carefully mention his good qualities ; with due caution remind him of his virtues, and dwell at reasonable length on what, in his general character, we find worthy of our sincere approbation ; and even when we advance to mention those faults which we wish to reform, it must be done with reference to the before mentioned virtues, that as the character is so nearly as it should be, our friend may be induced to render the whole consistent, by reformation.

Our Unitarian brethren have just claims to our respects and approbation for many things, which both duty and inclination induce us to acknowledge. They hold many, and ~~and~~ indeed the important, points of the christian faith accordingly as we believe they are revealed in the sacred scriptures.

These points of doctrine, at least some of them, we shall set forth, and endeavor to accompany them with some of the abundant proof, which the divine word affords.

1st. The particular tenet which gives them their name, as a denomination, is the strict *unity* of God, in contradistinction from the doctrine, known in the church, by the name of *trinity*, which teaches that there are, in the God-head, three distinct persons, who are co-equal, co-essential, and co-eternal. That our Unitarian brethren are fully supported by Scripture authority, in their belief in the strict unity of the God-head, we entertain no doubts. As proof of this important doctrine, we adduce the following: Moses, who was commissioned by heaven to teach the house of Israel the true worship, uniformly taught the people as is expressed Deut. vi. 4, 5, "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." Now to us it appears reasonable, that if the true worship required a belief in a trinity of persons, in the God-head, Moses would have stated this fact, in place of stating what we have just recited. We are unable to see why the doctrine of the trinity was not taught by Moses if it be now the duty of religious teachers to insist on its truth. If it be said, that the doctrine of the trinity is more specially taught in the christian scriptures and dispensation, this at once directs us to the teachings of Jesus, who in reply to the scribe, of his day, who asked him, "which is the first commandment of all?" said; "The first of all the commandments is, hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment." If Jesus had intended to teach the doctrine of three persons in the God-head, as an ^{im-}provement on the unity of God as taught by Moses, we

see not why he should use the very words of Moses, which evidently disallows such doctrine. Nor can we reasonably believe that it is now any more the duty of christian ministers to insist on the doctrine of a trinity, than it was the duty of the divine master so to do. We may further add, that St. Paul was particular in giving instructions on our present subject, especially in his communication to Timothy, where he says, "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." But trinitarian doctors have insisted that this *man* Christ Jesus, is essentially God, being what they term the second person in the holy trinity. And yet this man told the people that he could do nothing of himself, and that his Father was greater than he.

2d. Our Unitarian brethren have travelled through the dark regions of that false divinity, which for ages has taught people to believe that it was not consistent with the divine perfections, for God to forgive the transgressions of mankind without first requiring and receiving a sacrifice of real sufferings, in room of inflicting the penalty of his broken law on the offenders; and they have happily arrived at the rational, and scriptural truth of the divine favor as flowing from the nature of the divine Being, without being induced by any creature act or suffering. They have justly discarded the whole doctrine of vicarious sufferings, and with eminent abilities have maintained the *fatherly* character of the great Creator. They understand and ably maintain the vast utility of the life, preaching, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus, as means in the wisdom of God, of planting and supporting true religion in our world; but they do not believe that our heavenly Father's love is the purchase of the Saviour's sufferings. Such doctrine they justly view as dishonorable to the Father of mercies, from whom every good gift, and every perfect gift descends. In these sentiments we believe that they are justified by the general

theme of scripture testimony, and in a very clear and forcible manner by the following passages : John iii. 16, 17, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world ; but that the world through him might be saved." 1 John iv. 9, 10, "In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins." By such testimony, we are certified that whatever benefit Jesus is to mankind, that benefit is the *effect* and not the *cause* of our heavenly Father's love.

3d. Our Unitarian brethren are deserving of high approbation, and even of gratitude, for their successful labors in disproving the unreasonable, unscriptural and heart-hardening doctrine of particular election and reprobation. Their doctors have, in their labors on this subject, contributed largely to open people's eyes, and to enable them to see that there is no scripture authority for believing, that the Father of our spirits, from all eternity elected some of the human family, and ordained them to a state of endless felicity ; while he reprobated the rest to endless, unmerciful sufferings. So very successful have their labors been, in disproving a doctrine so dishonorable to God, so revolting to the best feelings of the human heart, so withering to future prospects, so blighting to the charities of true religion, and so wonderfully productive of illiberal feelings and persecution, that the misguided defenders and supporters of those partial sentiments have grown cautious, and are seldom heard to advance those tenets in public or private ; and some have found it most convenient to deny them altogether. In their belief of the impartiality of the divine benevolence,

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we believe they are well and abundantly supported by scripture authority, as well as by the general economy of a most gracious Providence. We read that "the Lord is good unto all; and his tender mercies are over all his works." And again we are assured that he is no respecter of persons.

4th. Our Unitarian brethren maintain a far more wholesome doctrine, respecting the moral state in which we are introduced into the present world, than that which is held by their orthodox opponents. The doctrine known by the name of *total depravity*, which has for ages been supported in the church; by which people have been taught to believe, that man's whole nature is but a mass of moral corruption, and wholly incapable of thinking a good thought, or of performing a single good action, and is the object of the divine displeasure, and exposed to endless wrath, our Unitarian brethren utterly deny. In opposition to a sentiment, so discouraging to virtuous and pious endeavors, they successfully maintain that sin has not changed our nature from an object of the divine love, to an object of divine wrath; but that we stand in relation to our Creator, as our children to us their parents; that God loves even the disobedient; and treats them with kindness and pity even when he chastises them for transgressions. In this most rational doctrine they are evidently supported by the current testimony of the sacred writings. The divine Teacher directs us to pray to our Father in heaven, and assures us that we have more to expect from him, than children can receive from earthly parents.

5th. Our Unitarian brethren have far more rational and scriptural views of the doctrine of regeneration, than those for which their orthodox opposers contend. As they do not allow the doctrine of total depravity, so they see no necessity of a radical change of our nature, by regeneration. They very justly view the opinions, maintained by their opposers,

on this subject, as tending to consequences, by no means friendly to the growth of rational piety. People who believe that their very nature is evil, and that it is not in their power to please God, can derive from such sentiments no encouragement to obedience; but are naturally led to say: we must wait until God changes us, by his irresistible grace, before we can serve him at all. And even those who fancy themselves born again, are by no means secure from that pernicious vanity, which induced a Pharisee of old to thank God that he was not like other men. And if a careful and impartial survey of human society be made, no radical change of man's nature will be discovered. Our Unitarian brethren believe, and believe correctly, that true religion may be taught to men as easily as any other science. And that when its moral precepts are understood, they are such as the heart of man will naturally approve.

6th. Our Unitarian brethren fully acknowledge the perfection of all the divine attributes, and readily subscribe to their entire infinity. They believe that God is unbounded in goodness, almighty in power, unlimited in wisdom and knowledge; that he designs the happiness of all his creatures, and governs the universe for no other purpose than its happiness.

7th. In addition to all these most rational and heavenly sentiments, our Unitarian brethren maintain the right of individuals to exercise their own reason, and read and study the scriptures for themselves; to form their own opinions respecting the doctrine they reveal, and to be perfectly free and independent in openly professing their religious sentiments. And they moreover contend, that no professing christian ought to be deprived of the privileges of church fellowship and christian communion, merely on account of his peculiar opinions. They are so liberal as to be willing to exchange ministerial services with their orthodox oppo-

sers ; and earnestly contend that it is inconsistent with christian liberty, and christian charity to exclude them from their pulpits.

We have not time to enumerate all those things, for which we think our Unitarian brethren, as a denomination, are worthy of commendation ; but if we take a comprehensive view of those particulars which have been noticed, we shall, undoubtedly, be led to marvel that they have made such extensive and valuable improvements in the science of divinity.

They have renounced the unreasonable, perplexing doctrine of the trinity, and have driven its most able defenders to make concessions which amount to its entire renunciation. They have laid aside, as an uncomfortable, worn out garment, the whole scheme of vicarious sufferings, and of placating the wrath of an offended God ; and have made the happy discovery of a compassionate, kind and merciful Father in the supreme ruler of the universe. The doctrine of partial election and eternal reprobation they have dismissed with its deserved disapprobation. They have rejected the old notion of man's entire depravity, and hold that he is capable of moral improvement, in knowledge and holiness ; and in place of the visionary notions about a radical change of our nature, they insist on the more reasonable doctrine of a christian and virtuous education. And they moreover acknowledge all the divine perfections of our heavenly Father, believing in his infinite wisdom, power and goodness, and in the entire impartiality of his love to his creatures.

Here we seem to come to a pause. The query seems to crowd on the mind, how it is possible for one, who professes to be a believer in, and a defender of, the doctrine of Universal Salvation, to find any fault with these sentiments, or with the denomination which professes them ?

Christian friends, we find no fault with these sentiments. We believed them all, and endeavored to persuade others of their truth and importance, long before the controversy between the orthodox and Unitarians produced a division in this country.

The hearer will ask again, if the statements which have been made, concerning doctrine, do not, in the most plain and direct manner, amount to real Universalism? We reply, that in our opinion they do. And it is known also to the public, that the orthodox contend that Unitarians, in holding such sentiments, are in fact Universalists.

Here we repeat our text: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee." Worthy things are spoken, in the context, of the church of Ephesus, for which they received the approbation of him, who "holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the golden candlesticks." But after all, there was somewhat against that church; and notwithstanding we find in the doctrines, maintained by our Unitarian brethren, more to approve than we have had time to mention, we think there is somewhat against them. And this we shall now proceed to point out.

1st. As the Unitarian doctors, some of them at least, are not a whit behind the first in the world, as to natural talents, or acquired abilities, there seems to be no ground for supposing that they do not know, that the tenets of their faith, which they openly avow, both in their preaching and writings, do in fact necessarily lead to the belief of Universal Salvation; yet they, as a denomination, will not own that they believe it. So far from being ingenuous enough to profess openly the blessed doctrine of Universal Salvation, they generally so arrange and manange their public discourses as not only to keep this doctrine out of sight; but to cause the unlearned hearers to believe that their preachers disbelieve it. We acknowledge that this charge is not

venial ; and it is stated with feelings of reluctance. Nothing short of indubitable conviction of its being a fact, and a common practice, could compel us to state this wrong. We have been pained to witness the truth of this charge with our own ears, times not a few. After the learned preacher had, in a plain and lucid manner, laid down some of the great principles of divinity, and after drawing the most important inferences in favor of the doctrine of Universal Salvation ; and when the cheering light of this blessed doctrine shone about us, and in us, to such a degree as to lead us to think the preacher was about to remove the vail from his congregation at once, all of a sudden a deep wound was inflicted by the artful turn of the preacher, who for fear his congregation would believe him to be a full Universalist, reminds them, that notwithstanding these principles and inferences, we must remember, that “without holiness no man can see the Lord ;—Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish ;—Who will render to every man according to his deeds ;—He that believeth not the son shall not see life : but the wrath of God abideth on him ;—He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved ; and he that believeth not shall be damned ;—Jesus hath solemnly said, These shall go away into everlasting punishment ; but the righteous into life eternal.” Thus, by repeating one or two such passages at the conclusion of a discourse, the preacher satisfies his hearers in general that he by no means believes in the doctrine of Universal Salvation, or would at all encourage them to believe it. Though he is perfectly satisfied that such scriptures are, in no proper sense, opposed to the doctrine of Universal Salvation, he is fully persuaded that his hearers so understand them, by the force of their education ; and he is willing to make use of their ignorance to keep them still in darkness !

2d. Notwithstanding the purity of the great, leading principles maintained by Unitarian preachers, they rather avoid them in their common preaching, seldom bring them as the necessary food for their congregations, rather choosing to employ themselves in speculations of their own curious inventions, about a future state of rewards and punishments ! If we request them to produce any scripture authority for such notions, they will, in place of bringing scripture proof, undertake to justify such notions by reasoning, as they say, from analogy. They take for granted that vice is not sufficiently punished, nor virtue sufficiently recompensed in this life ; of course, there must be a state hereafter of righteous retribution, or the divine Being will never be able to vindicate the impartiality of his justice. Thus with their speculations, unsupported by one word of divine authority, they invade the world to come, and amuse themselves and their hearers with the curious texture of a web, both the warp and woof of which is of their own invention. The moment we examine what this speculation takes for granted, and on which the whole is founded, it vanishes from our sight. If it be a fact that the divine Being does not, in this world, fully punish sin, and reward righteousness, it necessarily follows, that judging from all which we know, he never will. Suppose we should undertake to maintain that the supreme Being is really unjust, in his moral government ; what better proof would be required than acknowledged facts ? We have a history of man in this world for almost six thousand years ; and if this whole history fairly make out that wickedness is not sufficiently punished, nor righteousness adequately rewarded, here on earth, how many more thousand years would it require, for the same neglect, in administering rewards and punishments, to convince us that the Ruler of the universe is not careful in the concerns of justice ?

Another view, of what these divines take for granted, at once discovers its most condemning defects. If we say that wickedness is not sufficiently punished, nor righteousness adequately rewarded, in this world, we must allow that the necessary consequences of wickedness are not so evil as wickedness itself; and that the necessary consequences of righteousness are not so good as righteousness. What then, we ask, is bad enough to punish wickedness, if wickedness is not? And on the other hand, we ask, what is good enough to reward righteousness, if righteousness is not? If by going into the future world, the wicked should increase in wickedness, and the righteous in righteousness, this would only throw divine justice farther in arrears, which would refute the doctrine of this ingenious speculation. While feeding on such unrealities, who can believe they are eating that bread of God, which came down from heaven to give life to the world?

3d. Such are the exalted notions which these brethren entertain of the moral improvements which they are making, that it is not unfrequent that they preach sermons on the fruitful subject, in which they endeavor to convey to their hearers an understanding of the immense distance which they are likely to be advanced in the future world, before their fellow beings, who, in consequence of their sinful neglects, in this world, will have to suffer in the world to come; while they for their vigilance here are to enjoy indescribable felicity! A single hint, indicating, that when this mortal shall have put on immortality, and death shall be swallowed up of life, all men will be equally glorious, equally righteous, and equally happy, is sure to meet with most pointed scorn. To such combustible stubble, suppose we touch one living coal of divine truth. Let us suppose the following case: A wife, who possess every christian excellence, that woman, in this world can possess, and whose domestic and social

virtues have arrived at the highest perfection attainable in a mortal state, should be informed, by her *godly* minister, just as she was going out of the world, that in the world to which she was going, she would enjoy the satisfaction of the divine presence, of walking the golden streets of paradise, in company with saints and angels, and of beholding the face of her Redeemer forever ; while her husband, for his worldly-mindedness, and for his neglect of religion, in this world, would be condemned to wander in darkness, in sorrow and woe. To a heart full of love divine, would this be a rose or a thorn ? What answer would these brethren return to the question, which the Saviour put to Simon, the pharisee ? “And when they had nothing to pay he frankly forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him most ?” What, my friends, shall we think of those moral and religious attainments, which give their possessors the assurance of seeing their fellow-creatures far less happy, in the future, eternal world, than they hope to be themselves ? If they loved their neighbors as themselves, would this boasted assurance be a source of joy, or sorrow ? However unlike christianity all this may be, it is, as it seems, the prize of their high calling, the laurel for which they contend, the crown for which they fight ! Let such arrogance be rebuked with the mild counsel of the humble Jesus : “Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart ; and ye shall find rest to your souls.”

4th. As the telling of those we love, the faults we discover in them, is a painful as well as an unthankful duty, we must be excused, for the present, after we have named one more fault, the correction of which would do them great honor. Among those commendable things which were named, in approbation of our Unitarian brethren, the hearer will recollect their liberality towards those christians, who differ from them in opinions. They have been laboring with all

their christian meekness, for years, to persuade their orthodox opposers to extend to them the right hand of christian fellowship, and to consent to reciprocate ministerial exchanges. We have read their learned and forcible arguments in favor of this brotherly practice ; and we have also read what their orthodox opposers have urged against it ; and we are fully satisfied that our Unitarian brethren have in reality the best of the argument. Now if the profession of liberality, without the practice, could make these brethren rich, in the righteousness of God, the angels of heaven might envy their attainments ! Will they exchange desks with Universalists ? By no means. What is the reason ? Because, in some points of doctrine we do not come exactly to their views. As to doctrine generally, they will allow that we are much nearer them, than are their orthodox brethren, whom they are constantly inviting to exchange ! Now if they, like the orthodox, were conscientious in refusing to exchange desks with those who hold doctrines opposed to their own, then would they act according to their profession, and would be consistent with themselves. But how are they to be justified in making those pretensions to liberality, while in fact it is not real ? Is this christianity ? Is it genuine honesty ? Is it such practice as this that is to give them such exalted stations, as they anticipate, in the coming world ? We beseech them either to discontinue the profession of liberality, or by their practice to convince us that they are sincere in it. How will this appear in the history of these times, an half a century hence ? We do not complain of this inconsistency and illiberality, which are so evident in the conduct of our brethren, because they are any particular inconvenience to us. Their character, as a denomination, is affected by these improprieties ; and it is for their interest, and for the promotion of sincere, christian

liberality, that we call on them to consider these things, and to make provision for as early a date of their reformation as possible.

To conclude : If we have stated any of these wrongs in a manner too pointed, or have given them a coloring more unfavorable than christian charity will warrant, we thus early ask forgiveness. We have not stated these defects, which we think we see in our brethren, without recollecting that we ourselves are also faulty. And we humbly ask them to use towards us the same faithfulness, which we have thought it our duty to exercise towards them. Let them do it in kindness and in brotherly love, and they shall receive our acknowledgements for the favor.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the spirit saith unto the churches.”

